



# Information Brief

## Problem Solving Teams

*Collaborative problem solving is a proven effective tool for a wide range of student and building-centered problems. Student/staff support teams in schools are among the most popular collaborative problem solving formats. They are organized to apply a systematic process designed to enhance understanding of the student's behavior and to guide design of effective intervention plans. These team structures can be effective mechanisms to intervene early and successfully improve problem behavior.*

### CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:

- *The school uses a collaborative planning and problem solving approach as a response to ongoing behavior problems.*
  - *Indicator: Problem-solving teams (e.g., BAT/TAT) provide quick and timely responses to a wide range of inappropriate student behaviors.*
  - *Indicator: Staff use problem solving strategies and problem-solving processes to design intervention strategies/positive behavior supports that assist students in developing alternative behaviors.*

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, one of the early intervention strategies that has demonstrated effectiveness in resolving concerns about student behavior is the problem-solving/solution-focused approach. This approach includes a systematic process for addressing concerns about students' problem behaviors early, after the onset of that behavior. Teams of educators are the structures used to implement this process. The teams' composition, as well as the process used, may vary from school to school; however, the focus and outcome of their work is the same – to design interventions that will alleviate the problem situation.

### A PROBLEM SOLVING/SOLUTION-FOCUSED APPROACH SCHOOL-BASED STUDENT/STAFF SUPPORT TEAMS

School-based teams are variously known as SATs; and Student/Staff Support Teams, Teacher Assistance Teams, TATs; Building Assistance Teams, BATs; School-wide Assistance Teams, SWATs; Student Support Teams, SSTs. They are similar in many aspects but differ somewhat in focus.

*“The various formats for problem solving teams hold in common a number of basic beliefs:*

- (1) responsibility for student success and problem resolution should be shared among school staff;*
- (2) the pooling of diverse talents and expertise among school staff is of significant value; and*
- (3) a forum for routine and timely problem solving should exist at the building level.”*

*-Phillips and McCullough, 1993*

### Teacher/Building Assistance Teams

Chalfant, Pysh, and Moultrie conceptualized the Teacher Assistance Team, TAT, in 1979. The authors viewed TATs as facilitative structures that could support the collaboration and empowerment of teachers, address individual student and school-wide system problems, provide preventive intervention for at-risk students, and identify appropriate referrals for special education. The primary focus of the TAT is providing support to teachers as they work with individual students. If patterns of problem behavior among groups of students occur, the emphasis may shift from solving individual student problems to solving system problems.

In Iowa, schools have adopted different names for their teams. However, regardless of the name, be it BAT, TAT, or SWAT, the premise is the same: Multiple heads are better than one. Classroom teachers can be effective with a significant number of problems if resolution of the problems is submitted to a systematic problem-solving/solution-focused process. The assumption is that interventions developed collectively are more likely to be unique, effective and implemented with greater integrity than those developed individually.

### Student Assistance Teams

Schools in Iowa originally formed Student Assistance Teams, SATs, to provide interventions with students suspected of substance abuse. Typically, they have been high school teams because of the problems they address. In many respects, SATs and TATs are similar. Both are building-based and use processes of early identification of problems that interfere with a student's needs and may affect a student's school performance and healthy development.

TATs focus on supporting teachers and designing interventions that will assist them in their work with students that are exhibiting problem behavior. SATs focus on students and intervene by referring them to appropriate resources. The primary responsibility of the SAT is to receive and screen students who are referred to them. Once a student is referred, the team gathers information about the student's physical and emotional health from a variety of relevant school sources. The information collected helps the team to decide upon next steps.

If a basis for the concern is determined, TAT members meet with the student and parent(s), either together or separately, to gather additional information and to make appropriate suggestions, such as referral to a tutor or to an outside agency. A plan for follow-up is then made.

#### TEAM COMPOSITION

Team membership varies depending upon the staffing and needs of a particular school. Student Assistance Team membership often consists of support staff such as guidance counselors, school nurses, school social workers and psychologists, prevention specialists, and/or physical education staff. The team calls upon parents and the referred student to provide information and to be the recipients of the team's recommendations.

In contrast, a core team of teachers, the parent, and when appropriate, the student comprise the Teacher Assistance Team. When a referral requires specialized expertise, the core team calls upon auxiliary members that serve on an *ad hoc* basis.

#### THE PROCESS

Teams may adopt different processes to help them understand the problem presented and to design a response. In the case of SATs, the process may be one that leads to referral of students and their families to a substance abuse treatment agency or counselor. For BATs/TATs the process may be problem-solving or solution-focused. Practitioners using problem-solving processes believe that it is important to analyze a problem thoroughly to understand it and design interventions that have a high probability of working. On the other hand, those using a solutions-focused approach believe in giving less attention to the presenting problem. Instead, they identify and build upon the strengths of the student in their interventions, with the conviction that to do so will also alleviate the problem situation. Regardless of the process used by these teams, their intent is the same – to intervene early after a student's problem is identified and to provide ways by which that problem may be alleviated and the student can achieve success.

#### SUMMARY

Team formats are proving to be effective and efficient structures for school-based problem solving. They are important components of a school's continuum of student-focused programs and services. Key to the success of any team are the skill levels of the members. Knowledge of both processes and content are essential. Somewhat limited research indicates high levels of problem resolution and consumer satisfaction with the process (Phillips, V. and McCullough, 1993).

**Comparison of Characteristics of TATs and SATs**

Characteristics	Teacher Assistance Teams	Student Assistance Teams
<b>Purpose</b>	Provide support to teachers in intervening with individual students, groups of students, or the system.	Intervene early with students and, when appropriate, refer them for assistance.
<b>Target of Assistance</b>	Teachers	Students and their families
<b>Scope of the work</b>	Individual students and the system	Students only
<b>Data Collection</b>	Student and setting data	Student data only
<b>Team Composition</b>	Usually 3-5 general education teachers, although composition may vary.	6-8 trained school staff, especially health professionals
<b>Phase 1</b>	Problem Identification	Problem Identification
<b>Phase 2</b>	Problem Analysis	Screening
<b>Phase 3</b>	Behavior Intervention Plan	Referral
<b>Phase 4</b>	Follow-up	Follow-up
<b>Parent Involvement</b>	Part of the team	Recipient of referral
<b>Student Involvement</b>	Member of the team, when appropriate	Target of the intervention

#### LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:

- For assistance with your team training, contact your area education agency.
- **Web sites:**
  - North Central Regional Educational Laboratory:  
<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/drugfree/sa11k.23.htm>
- **In this Handbook:** See additional briefs, especially *Early Intervention and Positive Behavioral Supports*. In other sections of the manual, please refer to *Early Warning*, *Timely Response*, *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*, and "Success4's Critical Elements."